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Working apart together

By Juriaan van Meel and Rikke Brinkø

How much can corporate facilities managers learn from the cloud-based desk jockeys embracing co-working in the UK's big cities? Juriaan van Meel and Rikke Brinkø report on a growing movement.

Cowork offices are shared workplaces for freelancers and independent workers who find working from home too lonely.

Think of cheap yet funky workspaces where you can rent desks month to month, or even daily.

The idea is that people not only share office facilities, but also a sense of community, allowing for collaboration and synergies.

Coworking is still a bit of a subculture, very much focused at the creative and tech industries, but it is slowly slipping into the corporate mainstream. For FMs, the idea could be an interesting way to facilitate mobile and remote workers. Moreover, coworking could be a source of inspiration for how to create vibrant and user-friendly workplaces.

Coworking's origins

In the mid-1990s a Silicon Valley computer programmer named Brad Neuberg quit his job at a large corporation to pursue a freelance career. Although he was happy to escape from the corporate world, he missed the company of others and the structure of working at an office.

This triggered him to create the

'Spiral Muse coworking community', generally considered to be the first formal cowork initiative. It consisted of a small number of desks, some sofas and a kitchenette in a women's centre in San Francisco.

The desks were available to self-employed workers for \$100 a month. The promotional website for the space asked: "Do you work for yourself from home? Do you miss community and structure? Join Spiral Muse and Brad Neuberg in creating a new kind of work environment for free spirits!"

Neuberg aimed to create a more utopian work community where members would not only share office facilities, but also have lunch together, go on hikes, and even share after-work hours.

But the Spiral Muse Coworking Community closed within a year. Neuberg had wanted it to be a bit hippie-like (with "yoga and stuff"), but it didn't work. But the idea, and its idealistic objectives, survived. Other freelancers in the San Francisco area opened new coworking spaces, and the idea rapidly spread across the US and around the globe. Today, there are more than 2,500 coworkspaces worldwide, with cities like London,

New York and Berlin having more than 60 coworking sites each.

Home, office, cafe

The main explanation for the rise of cowork spaces such as Republikken lies in the growth of the number of freelancers. In the past 20 years, companies have been reducing their numbers of permanent staffers and started to use more freelancers and project-based workers.

At the same time, a significant number of people have chosen to be self-employed and start their own small businesses, away from the pressures of ordinary corporate life.

The obvious choice for this growing group of independent workers (sometimes also referred to as 'indie workers' or 'microentrepreneurs') would be to work from home because it is cheap and flexible. But working from home can present difficulties. It can be lonely and it can be a challenge to manage the borders between work and private life (as an ad for an American coworkspace reads: "Working at home sucks").

Some independents try working in cafes because of the liveliness and the atmosphere, but the trouble is that cafes can be noisy and impractical (think for example of going to the loo, wondering whether you take your laptop with you or not). So, cafes are OK for quick tasks, but not as a structural solution.

Renting a small office, or a desk at a serviced office, is also an option, but this tends to be expensive and the spaces tend to be rather traditional, not doing much to stimulate interaction between people. And this is where coworking comes in; it is a casual, shared workplace, where one works

along like-minded people. Ideally, coworkspaces offer the best of the options mentioned before: the low costs and flexibility from working at home, the professional facilities and structure of a serviced office, and the vibe and social atmosphere of a café.

"Disownership is the new ownership"

The social aspect of coworking is considered to be one of its most defining features. According to Wikipedia, coworking is "the social gathering of a group of people, who are still working independently, but who share values, and who are interested in the synergy that can happen from working with talented people in the same space".

Coworkers are expected not only to share workspace, but also to participate in the life of the community and share their ideas with other inhabitants. In that sense the idea has an explicit idealistic touch to it. Proponents of coworking even talk about it as a "movement" with four common values: collaboration, openness, community and sustainability. They link the idea to that of the "shared economy" – an economy where access trumps ownership. The catchphrase is "disownership is the new ownership".

So coworking tends to attract a different type of user from conventional offices and office hotels. Coworkspaces are generally populated by people who can be labelled as "urban creatives", working in media, design and tech. In terms of fashion stereotypes it is less suit and tie, more skinny jeans and designer glasses. This creative nature of the coworking movement is clearly reflected in the spatial design of coworkspaces. Whereas serviced offices tend to be arranged in office-like neat spaces, with acoustic ceilings, grey carpets and office partitions, coworkspaces tend to have a grungy feel. As in the case of Republikken, coworkspaces tend to look like a cross between a trendy coffee house, artist's studio and start-up office. Think of bare concrete ceilings, exposed ducting and cabling, and cheap furnishings. This look is the result of low budgets and a DIY attitude, but also a deliberate bid to express that coworkspaces are different from conventional offices.

It should also be said, however, that in terms of volume coworking is still a rather marginal phenomenon.

The total number of people making use of coworkspaces is estimated at 110,000 – very few when compared with the total number of office workers.

Having said that, it should also be pointed out that the idea is likely to become more mainstream in the coming years as work becomes more mobile and flexible. Already, the idea has caught the attention of



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large corporations, and some cowork offices have started to offer corporate memberships.

For corporations, such memberships can be interesting for facilitating their mobile employees. Employees who travel frequently may find it more pleasant to work at a cowork office than at a hotel room or their client's office. Likewise, it can be an interesting option for workers who live far away from their company's office or project teams and are in a sudden and temporary need for team space.

Another, more strategic reason for corporate coworking is that these cowork venues can be seen as an entry point to a vibrant network of young talent and start-up companies. This is the reason why companies such as Twitter and AT&T have placed some employees and project teams at cowork venues that are specifically targeted at tech entrepreneurs.

For the same reason Google even created its own cowork venue Campus in London, which offers cheap space and mentoring for start-ups and tech entrepreneurs.

For mainstream organisations that would probably be a step too far, but it could still be a good idea to create small cowork-like spaces for students, freelancers and specialist companies. It would allow for easy collaboration and access to talent. And it could be a smart strategy to make use of the surplus of office space that many companies currently have.

Cowork and FM

To the average facilities manager, coworking may seem too alternative, too trendy and too small scale. Yet, from a practical point of view, FM and coworking are basically the same: the provision of physical space where people can work, interact, and be productive. From that perspective coworking may be an interesting source of inspiration to corporate FM.

It is interesting to see how cowork sites manage to create attractive workplaces with rather low budgets. To keep the space affordable for their members, coworksites are often in old, slightly rundown buildings, with inexpensive fit-outs. Finishes are raw, the facilities basic, and the furniture secondhand. Much of it is DIY. This type of design may not be appropriate for large corporations, but it does show that there are alternatives to the expensive and bland fit-outs often seen in corporate offices.

Also interesting is the role of the so called 'hosts' in coworking offices. In many ways cowork hosts have the same responsibilities as FMs, taking care of practical things such as rental contracts, Wi-Fi, coffee beans and printers. But hosts also play an important social role. Their task is to



turn a dead office into a lively idea space, making sure that newcomers feel at home, that people connect, and that things are happening – such as organising lunches, afternoon drinks, lectures, workshops and exhibitions. All of this is focused on building a community where people know each other and easily share ideas – an idea that is also critical to large corporations.

The most important quality of cowork sites probably lies in their strong customer focus. Unlike corporate facilities managers, the operators of cowork offices work in a highly competitive environment; if they do not provide value for money and listen to the needs of their users, people will simply decide to work somewhere else.

This type of competition is not present in corporate facilities management. FM is traditionally a world of compulsive sourcing – users go the office because they have to. They will show up because they are employed there, regardless of the quality of the facilities provided. This is not to imply that FMs do not care about user satisfaction, but they lack the competitive incentive that coworkspaces are driven by.

But this is slowly changing. It is common knowledge that corporate workplaces are only used 40 per cent of the time they are available. Slowly but surely, corporate employees are becoming more mobile, getting more freedom to choose where they want to work, as long as they are productive. This freedom will push organisations, and their facilities managers, to think harder about the attractiveness of the work environment they have on offer –

assuming they see the value of creating offices that are lively and busy. Just as in coworking, the challenge will be to create spaces that are not only efficient but also hospitable, supportive places where people go because they want to, not because they have to.

As a thought experiment, facilities managers should try to consider themselves as the hosts or operators of a coworkspace. If they were, would their buildings still be filled with people? Would people even be willing to pay for working there? Or would staff rather work from home, a café, another coworkspace, or elsewhere? Because if that would be the case, it is time for change.

The movement in Europe: coworking in Denmark

Denmark has been slow to pick up the trend, but there are currently several cowork spaces, mostly in Copenhagen and Aarhus. Prices range between DK2,000 to DK4000 (£220-£440) a desk a month. One of the best-known and earliest examples is Republikken, which calls itself an "arbejdsfælleskab" (Danish for "work community"). It is based in an old building on Vesterbrogade, a busy street in a central part of Copenhagen that is slightly run down yet rapidly gentrifying.

In Republikken's workspaces you see casually dressed people working behind large computer screens. Most are independent creatives, such as designers, architects, photographers and copywriters. The workspaces are large and studio-like with high ceilings and old wooden floors. The initiative for Republikken came from a group of freelancers in need of workspace, but

it has grown into a professionally run workplace with more than 75 desks. Recently, Republikken expanded and also created an 'office hotel' for small businesses, teaching spaces for courses, a workshop with a laser cutter, and even a street café. Most of it was designed and furnished by the members of Republikken.

Coworking websites and apps: searching for space

The rise of co-work has led to the development of a variety of websites and apps that help people to find co-workplaces across the world. Websites such as www.sharedesk.net and www.deskwanted.com are good examples.

One of the most advanced tools is 'worksug' (see www.worksug.com), which is a smartphone app that tells you where nearby workplace are, including not only co-work spaces, but also cafes and libraries. It shows the ratings of other users for each location, looking at items such as the quality of the coffee, the noise level, the availability of power sockets and Wi-Fi, and also the community feel and 'coolness' of the venue. In that way it captures the essential qualities of a contemporary workplace.

For corporate FM, it would be interesting to have a similar app that would allow corporate staff to rate the quality of their premises, providing direct feedback about the quality of the FM services. The same app could be used to report complaints, or check the availability of meeting rooms.

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